# Methods for Increasing Bilingual Communication (Spanish/English)
## in the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department

## Executive Leadership

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**An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program.**

**September 1998**

# ABSTRACT

The demographic and cultural characteristics of the United States have undergone significant changes over the past several years. This is especially true of the City of Coral Gables Florida. A problem exists when these demographic and cultural changes create new demands on the fire service to be able to communicate with individuals who have little or no ability to communicate in the English language. The purpose of this research paper was to identify different methods for increasing bilingual communication skills, specifically Spanish and English, in the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department. An evaluative research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

1. What is the population in the Miami-Dade County and Coral Gables areas?

2. What percentage of these populations are of Hispanic origin?

3. What percentage of the population in these areas speak little or no English?

4. How many members of the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department speak Spanish?

5. In the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas, are there any on-duty programs established to train personnel to speak the Spanish language?

6. Do any of the other departments in the Miami-Dade or Broward County areas provide incentives for the use of Spanish as a second language?

7. What are some methods to increase the bilingual communications abilities on the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department?

A phone survey was conducted with all career/paid fire departments located in the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas. This survey was used for determining if any departments had in-house programs for teaching Spanish to their employees or "incentive" plans for firefighters who

communicated in Spanish for job-related activities.

The quantitative research findings for the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas indicates that the majority of fire-rescue departments in these two counties are not currently providing any type of Spanish language training for emergency response personnel. Additionally, fire-rescue personnel who are bilingual (Spanish and English) in all but one department, are not provided any incentives for the use of this skill on the job.

A recommendation was made to adopt one or more of the following methods to help achieve the goal of increasing bilingual communication skills in the department.

1. Provide on-duty Spanish training to personnel using either an instructor, computerized program, and/or audio tape program.

2. Recruit community volunteers to assist in establishing a bilingual training program.

3. Encourage personnel to attend an off-duty Spanish language program utilizing the current educational tuition reimbursement plan provided by the City.

4. Seek to recruit and hire bilingual employees in the future.

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# INTRODUCTION

The demographic and cultural characteristics of the United States have undergone significant changes over the past several years.  This is especially true of the City of Coral Gables Florida.  A problem exists when these demographic and cultural changes create new demands on the fire service to be able to communicate with those individuals who have little or no ability to communicate in the English language.   The purpose of this research paper is to identify different methods for increasing bilingual communication skills, specifically Spanish and English, in the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department.

An evaluative research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

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# BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The demographic composition of the United States, the State of Florida, and specifically the City of Coral Gables is rapidly changing. The Hispanic population living in our community has increased to the point now that it represents the largest percentage of the population in the city. This growth has been the result of the city becoming a financial center for international corporations located in South and Central America, and the Caribbean basin. Many executives and their families have relocated into the city in order to conduct business in the United States. Additionally, the Miami-Dade County area is where many newcomers (immigrants) seeking citizenship relocate.

As a result of this large influx of new people into the area and city, demands for services provided by Coral Gables Fire-Rescue have increased. A more serious problem that is emerging from this sudden increase in population, is the inability of many new residents in the city to communicate in the English language.

The National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officers' program, Executive Leadership course (1998, March) addressed the need to strategically plan for the future development of the fire service. This course specifically discussed the need to foster creativity and innovation in the services provided. In order to facilitate change within an organization, the course discussed decision making skills for fire officers and presented a model for effective decision making. Fire service managers need to develop effective methods for addressing demographic changes that impact on service levels and delivery. Using the principles outlined, discussed, and practiced at the National Fire Academy, the fire service manager should be better prepared to address existing and future service demands.

In the city of Coral Gables, Florida there is currently no strategic plan for the development and implementation of a Spanish language training program.  One of the serious consequences of this, is that vital public service departments, like police and fire, may have limited capability to communicate with Spanish callers and residents requesting emergency services like fire, emergency medical, police, etc.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For this research project, a literary investigation was conducting utilizing the resources of the

Learning Research Center at the National Fire Academy, various fire and emergency medical

services journals, and Internet searches.

Demographics for the region

In March 1997, the U.S. Census Bureau released a report detailing the population and

characteristics of  the Hispanic population in the United States.  The report highlighted several

interesting points, which included:

1.      The Hispanic population in 1997 was approximately 29.7 million people.

2.      This represented approximately eleven (11%) percent of the total U.S. population in 1997.

3.      More than half (55.8%) of all Hispanics residing in the United States were born in the United

         States.

4.      Approximately sixty-eight (68%) percent of all Hispanic families were married-couple

         families.

5.      Approximately thirty-five (35%) percent of the Hispanic population is under the age of 18

         years.

The City of Coral Gables is located within the Miami-Dade County area of South Florida,

and is the largest county in the state of Florida.  According to the last United States Census (1990),

the metropolitan Miami-Dade County area had a population of 1,937,094 people, of which 953,407

were of "Hispanic" origin.  The Hispanic population accounts for approximately 49 percent of the

total population in the county.

Current projections by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1995) estimated that in 1995, the

Hispanic population in the greater Miami-Dade County area had reached 1.134 million people (out

of a total population of 2.057 million), or approximately 55.1 percent of the total county population.

It was projected that by the year 2000, the Hispanic population would be approximately 1.341

million people (out of a projected county population of 2.291 million) and would account for 58.5

percent of the total county population. (p. 8) The growth of the Hispanic population in the Miami-

Dade County area is reflected in Table A.

**Hispanic Population of Miami-Dade County**
**(in thousands)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 3500 | |
| 3000 | |
| 2500 | |
| 2000 | |
| 1500 | |
| 1000 | |
| 500 | |
| 0 | |

1950   1960   1970   1980   1990   1995   2000   2005   2010   2015

**Actual and Projected Years**
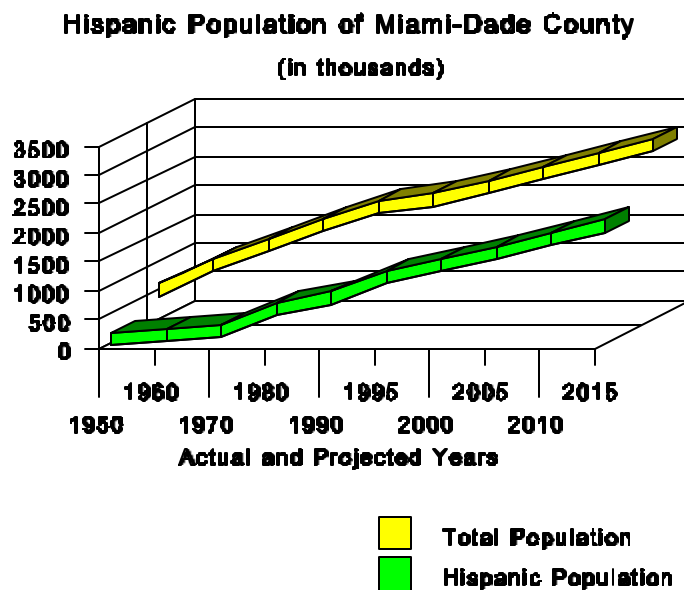
■ Total Population
■ Hispanic Population

TABLE A

By comparison and for future research reference, Broward County, Florida is the second

largest county in Florida, located to the north of and bordering Miami-Dade County. The 1995

population estimates show that 10 percent of the white and non-white population of the county was of Hispanic origin. The county has seen a doubling of the Hispanic population in the last 10 years. Of the Hispanic population in Broward County responding to the census, 38.8 percent responded that they did not speak English very well. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995, p. 15)

The City of Coral Gables has closely followed the Miami-Dade County trend in the increase of Hispanic representation. The city has seen a significant increase in the Hispanic population over the past thirty years. Since the year 1970, the percent of residents in the city who are of Hispanic origin has increased accordingly: 12.4 percent in 1970; 29.6 percent in 1980; to approximately 42 percent in 1990. The population for the City of Coral Gables (US Census; Florida; 1990) was 40,091 people, of which 16,778 were of Hispanic origin. Of the total number of Hispanics in the City of Coral Gables, 45.7 percent responded that they spoke very little English. The majority of these respondents were 18 years of age or older (34.8%).

Bilingualism in the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department

The City of Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department has 125 firefighters assigned to three battalions that respond to emergency service calls. Additionally, there are 21 staff positions that form the administration for the department.

In a recent survey (August 1998), it was determined that of the 125 firefighters assigned to battalion duty, 22 firefighters were proficient in both the English and Spanish language. This accounts for 17.6 percent of the battalion personnel that would be able to converse in the Spanish language if necessary. The remaining 103 firefighters (82.4%) can communicate only in English.

Establishing workplace diversity to address demographical changes

Fire service departments that employ individuals who can converse in other languages, especially those predominate in the community it serves, could help bridge the gap between the customer and the department. Judith Moore (1996) claims that " some of the most tragic errors in history have been the result of the inability or unwillingness to understand cultural differences" (p. 12). To be effective in dealing with certain cultures, Moore discussed different interviewing strategies and techniques that were based on the culture of the specific group. She claims that by utilizing these techniques, emergency service providers could significantly improve the quality of service provided to those individuals. (pp. 12-20)

As discussed previously, the research indicates a dramatic change in the demographical make-up of the United States in the next century. Rubaii-Barrett and Beck (1993) discussed in an article in Public Personnel Management, that "dynamic changes in work force characteristics over the next decade lead to projections that women and members of minority groups (especially Hispanics) will be the *major* source of new entrants into the workforce" (p. 503). They theorize that the performance of the organization will greatly depend on the ability of the public manager to "mobilize and direct" the diverse and multi cultural workforce.

According to Daniel L. Jones (1991), based on the 1991 report, Fire Force 2000: Preparing the Fire Service for the Workforce of the 21st Century, "minority increases in the entry work force will go from 18.4% in 1985 to 29% in the year 2000" (p. 9). As a result of this trend, Jones states that fire service administrators need to evaluate the current organizational culture, and

project the levels of service the department will offer in say 10 years.  From this information, a strategy can be developed to address customer service demands and integrate them into the department's organizational plan.

Pat Booker (1993) examined the growing demand for workplace diversity in the field of emergency medical services (EMS).  Booker hypothesizes that to compete in today's marketplace, organizations need to "make it a priority to provide responsive, market-oriented services to its clients and customers.  The United States is experiencing a major demographic transformation which will affect most urban EMS systems and many suburban/rural systems.  The average American work place is changing in gender, color, nationality and cultural points of view.  Given these projections, EMS organizations must not ignore their environment like 'ostriches' with their heads in the sand by underestimating the impact of this phenomenon" (p. 18).

In addressing the need to respond to the demands of a diverse community, Aurora, Colorado established a "campaign of community involvement directed at a wide representation of the ethnic communities" (LaRusso, pp. 80-81).  Aurora established several programs to help reduce the possible negative consequences of not being able to effectively communicate with the different ethnic citizens of the community.  The chief program recruited and developed volunteers from the community who became translators for emergency services.  These volunteers, in addition to helping staff emergency phone lines, helped develop a "book of basic questions and responses."

Since 1989, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) has provided a "language center" that works through the current 911 system.  (Munks, 1995, pp. 25-27)  The system, called "Answer

Point" enables the 911 operator to conference in an interpreter from the service to discover the nature of the emergency. This system is currently available in 40 percent of the nation's hospitals and its success has been well documented.

<u>Ethical Considerations</u>

Marlatt and Walz (1988) discuss the origins of the word <u>ethics</u>. They state that the word ethics is derived from the Greek word ethos, which means "the character or custom of the community" (pp. 446-447). As discussed in the previous section, the character of the City of Coral Gables is rapidly changing demographically.

Dennis Thompson (1987) discusses the moral responsibility of individuals who serve the public. "In its most general form, ethics requires that persons act on principles that could be accepted universally, that is by anyone who did not know his or her particular characteristics, such factors as social class, race, sex, and nationality" (pg. 2). Thompson continues, "according to the hierarchial mode, responsibility for a political outcome falls on the person who stands highest in the formal or informal chain of authority" (p. 41).

Many organizations are in budgetary crunches that stretch every dollar allocated to them to the limit. Levin, Peters, and Thompson (1990) state that "choices frequently involve difficult trade-offs among competing values such as efficiency. The correct response often depends on the context. Moreover, civil servants frequently deal with policy issues for which crisp ethics guidelines do not exist" (p. 192). They argue that the civil servant needs to develop a "personal responsibility" for his or her actions. In this way, the civil servant becomes a moral individual who in turn, helps to

create a moral organization.  (p. 193)

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (Marlatt & Walz, 1988, p. 447) has established a code of ethics for members of its organization and the fire service in general.  When addressing the topic of responsiveness to the needs of the employee and the citizens the organization serves, two items in the code are applicable to this discussion:

1.      Ensure that the lifesaving services offered under the member's direction be provided fairly and equitably to all without regard to other considerations.

2.      Be mindful of the needs of peers and subordinates and assist them freely in developing their skills, abilities, and talents to the fullest extent; offer encouragement to those trying to better themselves and the fire service.

The National Fire Academy's Executive Leadership Course uses Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeiffer's Applied Strategic Planning Guide (1992) to outline the procedures organizations should use to effectively plan for the future.  One of the important steps in this strategic planning model is the "values scan."  During this step, "all business decisions are based on what an organization values (e.g., growth quality control, and ethics).  Strategic plans that do not consider the values in the organization will be in trouble and may even fail.  During the values scan, the planning team examines the following five elements: personal values of the members of the planning team, the values of the organization as a whole, the organization's operating philosophy, the organization's culture, and the organization's stakeholders"  (p.1).

The Fire Service Leader and the Future

As the demographics of the country change, the Fire Service leader of the future will need to take into consideration the changes we have discussed previously.  Social responsibility of the fire service will demand and expect these changes.

John W. Work (1996) states that "both the multi cultural and technological aspect of these powerful changes in American institutions and workplaces are much in evidence.  For example, numerous racial and ethnic groups; differing languages;, communication patterns, and cultural values; an altered workplace structure and dynamics; and new patterns of educational and training demands are becoming common-place and go well beyond the scope of traditional corporate cultures" (p. 71).   Work concludes his discussion of diversity by emphasizing the leader of the future must be become more "sensitive and understanding" when faced with cultural and ethnical differences.   The leader must become the "linchpin" between the organization and the community to help bridge these gaps.

Rita Soler Ossolinski (1992) discussed how positive responses to changing demographics could impact on the success of diversification of the workplace and providing a responsive service to the organization's customers.  The success of the City of San Diego to effectively address the need to diversify its workplace, in light of  rapidly changing demographics of the city, was highlighted and discussed in the article. Of the lessons learned from the success of San Diego, Soler and Ossolinski state, "long term actions include changing recruitment, hiring, and promotional practices; reorienting the staff toward a customer service approach to service delivery; and restructuring traditional communication from top down and encouraging a bottom-up approach"  (p. 20).

In order to accomplish this customer driven organization, the Fire Service leader must consider the organizational goals. Ken Blanchard (1996) postulates that the organizational hierarchy needs to be "turned upside down." In other words, the customer and the customer's need's should drive the organization. Blanchard states, it is the customer and the customer's needs that are really at the top of the upside-down organization. (pp. 81-88)

## PROCEDURES

A phone survey (see Appendix A) was conducted with all career/paid fire departments located in the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas.

Population

Respondents consisted of executive fire officers from each of the jurisdictions located in this area. This survey was used for determining if any departments had in-house programs for teaching Spanish to their employees. Additionally, the phone survey was conducted to determine if any departments in the Miami-Dade or Broward County areas provided any type of "incentives" to firefighters who utilized the Spanish language while performing job-related duties.

Instrumentation

A three question telephone survey instrument, entitled Spanish in the Workplace, was used to solicit information on the training and incentive programs in the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas. Responses were documented and recorded on the survey form for later tabulation.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The first assumption made was that all respondents were knowledgeable of their department's training programs and incentive plan. It was for this reason that Chief Fire Officers from each department's Operations or Administrative Division were questioned.

The second assumption made was that those responding to the survey would be truthful and honest in their responses to the questions.

The first limitation noted is that the population size was small 26. Although small, it represented the majority (26 out of 28 career/paid departments) of the departments of the survey area conducted, fire-rescue departments located in the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas.

The second limitation noted was that two of the 28 departments in the surveyed areas failed to call back after the surveyor left messages. Only two attempts were made to contact each department.

A third limitation noted is that Miami-Dade County is comprised of only six career/paid departments. This accounts for only 16 percent of the total departments polled.

**RESULTS**

The survey results were used to answer the following questions:

1.      In the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas, are there any on-duty programs established

to train personnel to speak the Spanish language?

Results from the survey indicated that there were only two departments in the Miami-Dade and

Broward County areas that provided an in-house Spanish program.  All two of the departments

providing this training were located in the Miami-Dade County area.  No departments in Broward

County (n=20) provided any type of in-house training.

While conducting the phone survey, 14 of the departments indicated that they had tuition

reimbursement programs that would cover employees taking a second language course.   However,

all departments (n=14) indicated that the employee had to take the course on his or her own time.

All departments had no provision to allow employees to go to school on department time, while on-

duty.

2.      Do any of the other departments in the Miami-Dade or Broward County areas provide

incentives (monetary or other) for the use of Spanish on the job?

Only one department out to the twenty-six responding provided a monetary incentive for employees

who used Spanish in carrying out their duties.  This consisted of a monetary reward for the use of

Spanish in the workplace. Asked if any departments currently had any immediate plans to address

this issue, all 25 departments surveyed indicated there were no immediate plans for incentives.

**DISCUSSION**

The quantitative research findings for the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas indicates that the majority of fire-rescue departments in these two counties are not currently providing any type of Spanish language training for emergency response personnel. Additionally, fire-rescue personnel who are bilingual (Spanish and English) in all but one department, are not provided any incentives for the use of this skill on the job.

The literature review discussed the changing demographics in the Miami-Dade County area and specifically in the City of Coral Gables. Current census information indicates that the Hispanic population accounts for approximately 42 percent of the city's total population. More importantly, the literature review indicated that almost half (45.7%) of the Hispanic population spoke little or no English.

These dramatic demographic changes that have occurred over the past 30 years supports the need for the fire service, especially in the City of Coral Gables, to provide services that can bridge the potential language gap. The inability to communicate effectively with the caller, can adversely affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the department responding. Delays in dispatching the correct unit(s), providing an inappropriate service requested or needed, or more seriously, providing the wrong medical treatment on emergency medical calls highlight the severity of this growing problem. Ethically, fire service administrators must be willing to be responsive to ever changing demands by the citizens (customers) their organization serves.

The City of Coral Gables has emerged as a truly international city, with a strong reliance on

corporations and banking institutions largely located in the Caribbean and South and Central America. Since the predominate language of all these regions is Spanish, many executives and employees of these corporations bring their families with them when they visit or relocate. Although many of these international executives and employees are bilingual in both Spanish and English, it is the family members who often lack communication skills. As a result, it is these fire and emergency medical services customers that may have limited ability to communicate the severity of their emergency and/or needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research project was to propose a plan to address the need for Bilingualism, specifically English and Spanish, in the City of Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department. The literature review identified several methods that could be implemented by the City's Fire-Rescue to address the language barrier gap, that is and will continue to grow over the next several years.

A strategic plan needs to be developed to address methods for achieving the goal of Bilingualism in the fire service. This may entail identifying the level of skill required, that is whether to seek total fluency in the language or just the development of a "survival" skill, or to modify hiring practices to attract bilingual firefighters. The following methods are recommended for consideration.

<u>On-duty training</u>

One plan that could be implemented for on-duty personnel is to provide Spanish language training in the workplace. There are several methods that could be implemented to accomplishing

this.

One method would be to hire an outside contractor to provide the training.   In the Miami-Dade County area, there are several private companies that provide this type of service.  A list of these resources could be easily found in the existing phone directory.

A second method that could be used would be to identify, public and private educational institutions, high schools and/or colleges in the area that could provide this type of training. Instructors could provide classes on designated dates and times to employees on duty.

A third method for achieving an in-house training program might include the use of audio tapes or an  interactive computer program.  Coral Gables Fire-Rescue currently has tape recorders and computers in each station that could be used in this type of training.  Costs associated with this type of program would be significantly lower than many of the other options discussed in this paper.

Recruit community volunteers

The fire department might consider soliciting volunteers from the Coral Gables community or the pool of existing bilingual employees to assist in bilingual training.     These volunteers would work with the department's Training Division to identify and establish the training program and its content. The use of community volunteers, as in Aurora, Colorado, would seem to be a workable and mutually beneficial program.  The use of existing department volunteers (employees), might require a pre-negotiated agreement between the fire department's union local and management.

<u>Off duty training--tuition reimbursements</u>

The City of Coral Gables currently has a college tuition reimbursement program that would cover employees wishing to learn a second language in the workplace. As of the date of this writing, no employee now or in recent memory, has taken advantage of this opportunity.

If the department was to take this avenue to encourage employees to become fluent in the Spanish language, it might need to address some sort of incentive program to promote interest in the program. A concern of this type of incentive policy is that existing bilingual employees should receive the same types of incentives. This could impact the efficiency or budget of the department. Before any type of incentive plan is offered, these impacts should be fully researched and studied.

<u>Future employees hired</u>

A final recommendation for increasing the Bilingualism in the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department would be to try to attract new employees who are fluent in Spanish. In order to accomplish this, the Personnel Department would need to investigate the "job relatedness" and legalities of such a proposition. Applicants who were bilingual (Spanish and English) could receive preference points that would be awarded after successfully passing the written portion of the test. This would be similar to giving added points to individuals who possess certifications in firefighting, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics. This would hopefully increase the pool of applicants who would be bilingual.

It is important that fire-rescue departments employ a proactive approach to address the changing needs of the communities they serve. The demographics of the area served should be

considered when appraising the level of service to be provided.  In the case of providing language training to firefighters, budgetary impacts, political ramifications, and other issues should be considered.

The previous recommendations were identified through the research presented in this paper. Adoption of one or a combination of any of these recommendations should prove beneficial in the attempts to increase bilingual communications on the Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department.

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# Appendix

**Phone Survey**

**Spanish in the Workplace**

1.      **Does your department provide any type of on-duty training programs to train personnel to speak the Spanish language?**

2.      **Does your department provide any type of incentives (monetary or other) for the use of the Spanish language while performing job-related duties and activities?**

3.      **Which county do you live in--Dade or Broward?**